

1. IT WOULD HAVE BEEN WORSE NOT TO HAVE BEEN DYING: AN ANALYSIS OF THE CRISIS OF HUMAN EXISTENCE

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Abstract

This paper examines the crisis of human existence. It examines the nature of existence and the central place of humans in existence. It critically discusses the myriad of problems humans encounter in existence that prompted some thinkers to believe that: (1) coming into existence is not worth it: ‘it would have been better not to have been born,’ and that coming into ‘existence is always bad for those who come into existence’; ‘although we may not be able to say of the never-existent, that never existing is good for them’, ‘we can say of the existent that existence is bad for them’, (2) death, in principle, removes all meaning from life; if we must die, then, life is meaningless. It agrees that the crisis of human existence is brutal and elusive, and rages from natural to artificial. However, it sees the position that says that owing to the fact we shall die, life is meaningless as erroneous, malicious, and capable of devastating human social well-being. Contrarily, it argues that death is a natural regulatory order of the universe. It justifies its position and concludes that ‘life would have been worse if we have not been dying.’

Keywords: Crisis-of-human-existence, Death, Existence, Life, Human existence.

Introduction

The myriad of problems encountered in human existence have made thinkers believe that coming into existence is not worth it: it would have been better not to have been born. This expression is part of a Jewish witticism; “Life is so terrible; it would have been better not to have been born. Who is so lucky? Not one in a hundred thousand” (Bernard 87, Nozick 38-9). The claim has generated several reactions by many authors either in support or against. For Freud, the assertion is a “nonsensical joke” (57). “Coming into existence is always bad for those who come into existence,” argues Benatar, “although we may not be able to say of the never-existent, that never existing is good for them, we can say of the existent that existence is bad for them” (4). Similarly, Olajide opines that: “This crushing discomfort which... characterized as forlornness is partly not unconnected with the dull and bleak realization that human birth or our coming into existence in itself has no defined purpose” (4).

This paper does a critical evaluation of the crisis of human existence. First, it examines the nature of existence, because if the term existence is not well understood, as Bertrand Russell argued, it can lead to false philosophy (Russell 234). This indicates that understanding the notion of existence is vital anytime discourse is centered on it. Existence shall be looked at from different schools of thought. In doing this, some fundamental questions are vital. Such as; what is existence? What is the relationship between existence and being, (if there is any)? Is existence one or many? What is the relationship between existence and essence; which precedes? Is existence and reality the same thing? What is it for something to have the

ontological status of being in existence? Is there any special metaphysical significance attached to something solely by its existence? The above and related questions shall guide our thoughts. The paper also examines the problems human beings encounter in existence that made those who claim 'it is better not to come into existence' express such a view.

On Existence

Philosophers are widely divided about what exists, this has, adversely, made it virtually impossible to say what existence is in a simple language. This is never a problem to philosophical minds; because they are aware that philosophical terms, like philosophy itself, are difficult to define in a few words or sentences. The different schools of thought and movements in philosophy have different views on what exists – by implication the definition of existence. Existence is always seen as what is real, because of this, reality is in most cases classified as existence. The question is: is reality or existence all about the tangible, visible, and practical? An affirmative answer to the above is in tune with the logical positivists and logical empiricists. The positivists and empiricists dismissed anything that does not have concrete and empirical verification. Ayer, a positivist, when commenting on existence, claimed that any statement that cannot be empirically verified is meaningless. He also classifies every ethical statement that sounds like 'ought', as an expression of emotion (36). Likewise, Rudolf, another positivist, emphasized that theological statements and metaphysical positions "are like laughing lyrics and music expressions" (432).

According to Blackburn, the term existence is pivotal to ontology (79). Ontology, which is the study of the nature of being, concerns what exists or could be said to exist. It also refers to the elusive characters of being, which differentiates real things from fictional ones. If this is the case, existence can best be described as the totality of reality in general, including the basic categories of being and their relations. The curiosity about things in existence gave birth to philosophy; all metaphysicians focus on it and are redefining it across generations and orientations. The existence of phenomena in the universe, such as the stars, the oceans, life, birth and death, and growth and decay, are cradles of humans' curiosity. Humans' curiosity, arguably, birthed religion, philosophy and other hermeneutic attempts to unravel the mystery behind reality. The earliest known Greek philosophers and cosmologists: Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes were curious about such phenomena mentioned above, hence, each postulated one thing or the other as the origin of things they saw in existence. Their (Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes) speculations and those of philosophers after them on the discussion of the nature of existence gave birth to the debate of the monists and the pluralists.

The monists, such as Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes, Benedict Spinoza, and G.W.F. Hegel, among others, argued that existence or reality is one single entity. They argued that multiple things we see, all owe their existence to one basic essence, and everything will return to where it came from. Each of these monists has a different thing as the basic substance (essence). The basic substance; Thales called it 'water', Anaximander called it '*Apeiron*', Anaximenes called it 'Air', Spinoza called it 'God', and Hegel called it '*Geist*'. Spinoza's position seems to explain this concept, when he writes in his work, *Ethics* (part one, definitions three and six);

By substance, I understand that which is in itself and is conceived through itself. In other words, the conception of which does not need the conception of another thing from which it must be formed. By God, I understand Being absolutely infinite, that is to say, substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which express external and infinite essence (1:3, 6)

In furtherance of the foregoing, Spinoza argues that “Whatever is, is in god, and nothing can either be or be conceived without god” (1:15) In line with Spinoza, Hegel claims that what exists is the absolute (*Geist*), which he classified as the ‘living substance’. “The living substance is being which is in truth subject” (18). There is no doubt Hegel was echoing Spinoza here. Hegel was even quoted to have said; “when someone begins to philosophize, one must first be a Spinozist” (quoted in Beiser 5). If the question is asked on how to account for the diverse things we can perceive in the world, Hegel would reply that: “things are what they are through the action of the concept, immanent in them, revealing itself in them” (Wartenberg 5).

The positions of the monists were rejected by the pluralists. The pluralists such as; Empedocles, Anaxagoras, Democritus, and Rene Descartes, among others, argued that what exists in the world, that is reality or existence, is more than one. For instance, Empedocles claims that reality is made up of four elements: earth, air, fire, and water. To Anaxagoras, there are indefinite numbers of elements (*spermata*). In the same way, Democritus and other atomists argued that existence comprises countless numbers of atoms. Descartes presented a classical argument of the pluralists when he avows;

I do recognize more than one principal kind of things: one is intellectual or cogitative things, that is, things pertaining to the mind or to thinking substance; and the other, material things, or things pertaining to extended substance or body. Perception, volition, and all modes of perceiving and willing pertain to thinking substance; while size (or extension in length, width; and depth), figure, motion, situation, divisibility of its parts, and such, pertain to extended substance (21).

The discourse on the nature of existence or reality is also the preoccupation of idealism and materialism. Plato, who argues for idealism, opines that ideas and values in an incorporeal realm are real beings; because they are self-existent and immutable, while material beings in the corporeal world are mere ephemeral, shadows, different from the real beings. On the other way round, Aristotle holds that only individual things called substances in the spatiotemporal world are fully existent beings, and other beings, called categories, such as relation and quality, have a derivative kind of being, dependent on those individual things. These two positions are classical expressions to argue for idealism and materialism respectively.

Being as Existence in Existentialism

The conceptions of existence illustrated thus far were rejected by later philosophers and humanist thinkers – the existentialists’ movement – because they felt existence in that way is being discussed at the gallery; it does not relate to human beings, the subject of existence. Even a few thinkers that related existence to humans; did not concentrate on the condition of the subjective person. They (existentialists) claim the preoccupation of philosophy and any other knowledge pursuit should be to see the human species in subjective terms rather than treating it in the objective form. In other words, existentialists reject earlier philosophical thoughts on existence because such thoughts have no direct positive effects on the human subject. Kierkegaard captures it thus: “Most systemizers in relation to their systems are like a man who builds an enormous castle and himself lives alongside in a shed; they themselves do not live in the systematic building. ...a man’s thought must be the building in which he lives, otherwise the whole thing is deranged” (519)

In anticipation of the importance that must be given to the human person, Heidegger said only the human species is capable of comprehending the wonders of things (quoted from Lawhead 534). Accordingly, Kierkegaard and later existentialists, centered existence on a

person realizing his personal choices, which Heidegger called ‘authentic being’ (167). Jean-Paul Sartre reechoed and added that human beings “are free”, and to realize their personal choices, “therefore (need to) choose” (297). Although existentialists argued that existence should be discussed from the human subjective view, they never deny the existence of other things. Their position is that the *Homo Sapiens* is not just an ordinary one among the many things (beings) in the world, ‘Being-alongside’ as Heidegger argued, but it is through human beings, which Heidegger called *Dasein*, that existence is revealed (228). The individual, therefore, is unique among the things in the world. *Dasein* recognized the fact that he is not only a Being-in-the-world but also Being-ahead-of-himself; this identity enables *Dasein* to become what he chooses to be because he has no specific nature; “being is without reason, without cause, and without necessity” (788). Lawhead pointed out that if humans have no nature then, it would be inappropriate to ask him who he is, rather, we should ask what he shall become (539).

Sartre presented a simplified analysis of existence concerning human beings in his essay: *Self-Deception*. He identified two categories of existence: being-in-itself (*l'en-soi*), which are inanimate objects and unconscious beings, and being-for-itself (*pour-soi*), which he categorized as human beings. “We can equally well use another kind of duplicity derived from human reality which we will express roughly by saying that it’s being-for-itself” (254). Human beings (*pour soi*) are conscious and free; continually making themselves by projecting to be what they want to be. Sartre devoted his work, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, to argue that human being has no essence or nature than the one he created, and therefore, ‘existence precedes essence.’ Human beings have no limitation or restriction or excuse from becoming and achieving whatever they wish to achieve (295).

With the above description of human existence, the question that readily comes to mind is whether human existence is as pleasant as described. Is it true that human is free to actualize whatever he wishes? Why do human potentials not always turn to actuality? What are those things that put human existence in jeopardy? Another question is as Gray asks, “Can we really conduct our lives in any fashion that death will not destroy the meaning and purpose we have built into our existence?” (126). These and related questions shall shape our thoughts in the next session tagged ‘The Crisis of Human Existence.’

The Crisis of Human Existence

The plethora of problems that human beings encounter, such as anxiety, fear, sickness, suffering, and above all death, and the uncertainty of after-life are threats and challenges to human survival and happiness. These problems, also classified as evil, are a mystery and brutal. Thus, Morrow (quoted in Agulanna) avowed we cannot know it ‘scientifically’; we can only know it ‘poetically’, ‘symbolically’, ‘historically’ and ‘emotionally’. We know it through its works that include sickness, diseases, earthquakes, sorrow, pain, anguish suffering and so on (2). In John Dewey’s view, “Man finds himself living in an aleatory world; his existence involves, to put it baldly, a gamble. The world is a scene of risk; it is uncertain, unstable, uncannily unstable. Its dangers are irregular, inconstant, not to be counted upon as to their times and seasons” (41). The havoc evil wrecks have made some thinkers question the nature of their existence and humanity in general. Job in the Holy Bible was troubled with such problems, that humans have a short life-circle which is full of trouble; they blossom like a flower and wither within a short time. They disappear quickly like a shadow (14:1-2). He went further in his inquiry into the human condition, which he was at that movement:

For there is hope of a tree, if it be cut down, that it will sprout again, and that the tender branch thereof will not cease. Though the root thereof wax old in

the earth, and the stock thereof die in the ground; Yet through the scent of water it will bud, and bring forth boughs like a plant. But man dieth, and wasteth away: yea, man giveth up the ghost, and, where is he? As the waters fail from the sea, and the flood decayeth and drieth up: So, man lieth down, and riseth not: till the heavens be no more, they shall not awake, nor be raised out of their sleep. O that thou wouldest hide me in the grave, that thou wouldest keep me secret, until thy wrath be past, that thou wouldest appoint me a set time, and remember me! If a man dies, shall he live again? (14:7-14A).

The humanist thinkers, popularly regarded as existentialists, despite the status of freedom they claim individuals have and the belief that humans are always becoming, freer, self-creating and self-transcending subjects, recognise these problems of existence. For Kierkegaard and those who subscribe to his religious type of existentialism, dread in human existence is maiden to salvation, from where humans take the ‘leap of faith’, which is absolute trust in God’s love that guarantees eternal life for humans. Some existentialists diverge from Kierkegaard’s notion, they argue that dread makes life meaningless, absurd, and without purpose. The latter position seems contradictory in a sense. How can someone have the freedom to become what he wishes, yet there are limitations? As Sartre argued, there is facticity in human life, yet such does not infringe on human freedom. Sartre's position on facticity can cater for responsibility but not to freedom. The question that comes to mind here is: is it possible for someone to be responsible when such a person is not free? In other words, can responsibility be accounted for when freedom is not guaranteed? The analysis of this is beyond the scope of this work, also, time and space would not be able to accommodate it.

The facticity or ‘thrownness’ or mood is what Heidegger described as coming “neither from ‘outside’ nor ‘inside’, but arises out of Being-in-the-world, as a way of such Being” (176). Gray identified this mood as the “feeling of the homelessness of man.” He added that “our natural and social environment oppresses us with its foreignness, its unsuitability as home for all that is specifically human” (114). This homelessness of the world is what the French-Algerian philosopher, Albert Camus, called ‘absurdity’ in his essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*. He writes;

A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world...man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of Promised Land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting is purely the feeling of absurdity (5).

The reason for the classification of life as absurd and meaningless is premised on the fact that humans’ efforts at ameliorating the endemic challenges of life ends in futility. The futility of human efforts is well captured by Camus in the above-mentioned work, where he presents the philosophy of the absurd, which deals with man’s futile search for meaning, unity, and clarity in the face of an unintelligible world devoid of God and eternal truths or values. Camus sketches several approaches to absurd life. He opines that the absurd conditions of human life are built on the hope for tomorrow; yet tomorrow brings us closer to death, the ultimate enemy which human is not certain of its nature. He illustrated the human condition with a Greek myth in which Sisyphus was condemned by the gods to the meaningless, futile, and endless struggle of rolling a stone to the top of a mountain only to watch the stone roll back to the bottom of the mountain. He would then start all over again to roll it up the mountain with so much effort and energy, and when he eventually seems successful, the stone falls back, and the process goes on endlessly.

Sisyphus will never realize his futile effort unless he pauses the action and reflects on what he is doing. Omoregbe links this to our contemporary society, where “the workman of

today works every day of his life at the same task and his faith is no less absurd” (85). That is, the same conditions that made existentialists classify human existence as meaningless are still present in us. We are in a world, which we do not know how we got into, nor wished consciously to be in; we find ourselves thrown into the world that is full of diverse natural disorderliness: sickness, hunger, drought, wildfire, earthquake, flood, tsunamis, cyclones, hurricanes and many other epidemics for which humans know nothing about, and are a threat to human existence. These natural spates have affected humans in all areas of the world across ages, and are producing pain, fear, anxiety, angst, and death. Any attempt to solve one of these problems will only result in another. And the attempt to solve the new one will result in yet another, ad-infinite.

These life-threatening problems have made many thinkers claim that ‘life is so terrible; it would have been better not to have been born’. Some have also argued for the termination of human life in the form of suicide, euthanasia, and abortion. The conclusion of such thinkers is because they feel ‘life is not worth living.’ The question is: why have those who called for the extinction of the human species because existence is plagued with dread, not led by example? Why have they not used the principle of, ‘a man’s thought must be the building in which he lives?’ If we follow the termination thesis, what hope lies in the grave? It should be noted that the majority of those who advocated the termination thesis one way or the other would agree with Karl Jaspers (quoted in Gray) that death is the ultimate “shipwreck” to human life – the “hopes for immortality are vain” (118). Camus, though claims that life is meaningless in the face of existential absurdity and that the ultimate question of existence, which he called the “fundamental question of philosophy”, is to ask “whether life is or is not worth living” (11), nonetheless, he is against this termination thesis. In Camus’ view, suicide is a cowardly escape from problems; it portrays a lack of courage and a refusal to face reality. Absurdity in life does not require suicide as a solution. The Meaninglessness of life, to him, should not be translated to say life is not worth living. Life does not have a prior meaning before it can be lived. On the other hand, it would be better if it had no meaning.

Camus reemphasized the problem which has been raised by ancient philosopher, Epicurus, which has to do with the nature of God and the existence of evil. Camus claims it is unbelievable that this absurd world, full of evils, is the work of an extremely good and omnipotent God. He expresses his inability to believe in God in the face of so much evil in the world. He said the way to deal with the question of the absurdity of human life is to revolt. He described revolt as the refusal to remain passive in the face of evil, injustice, and oppression. It is the determination to be strong and fight against absurdity, evil, and injustice with all the means at one’s disposal. ‘Revolt gives life its value. Spread out over the whole length of a life, it restores its majesty of that life.’ Thus, Camus maintained that it is by revolting that man gives meaning to his life and creates values, not only for himself but also for all men with whom he is in solidarity. Revolt involves self-commitment to a course in unanimity with the suffering of humanity (36).

Camus’ position is problematic because he provides sets of incoherent answers to human existential problems. For instance, he advocated for revolt. The question is who are we to revolt against, is it God who he (Camus) did not believe in his existence? Or did he believe in the existence of God but not his potency? Are we to revolt against the invisible forces that bring calamities on us? If as he claims all our efforts at ameliorating the existential condition is futile, and in the face of such life is meaningless, why do we continue to live then? In other words, if the existential condition is given, will revolt be able to overcome it?

The conclusion of those who advocated for ‘the termination thesis’ (who shall be regarded as ‘the terminators’ here), and the absurdity philosophers (particularly Sartre and

Camus) are not in any way near the possible solution to the existential problems they aimed to solve; though the existential problems that birth their ideas are, unarguably, hunting specter to us. We are born to live, and live to die. Therefore, we are born to die. The period between birth and death is life, and it is plagued. Scientific discoveries aimed at curtailing the plagues only immunize and multiply them. Technology aimed at lifting us above these plagues, only take us closer to death. Agricultural hybrid aimed at eradicating hunger and feed our belly, only succeeded to fill us with cancer and malignant tumours. The consequences of human attempts to eradicate these problems have almost made us conclude, 'it is high time we abandoned the scientific outlook that back-fires us against all the odds it aimed at.'

Death and the Crisis of Existence

Death is a visitor that every human person believes shall visit him or her, but the time of the visit and the location are unknown: we are "concerned that we are all sentenced to death without knowing the date of the execution" (Popovi 35). Also, no one wishes to be the next on the line to die. Death is unknown, though we may experience the death of others and deduce ours. Nonetheless, there seems to be no personal experience of death; perhaps this made Karl Jaspers avow; "death is something inconceivable, something really unthinkable. What we imagine and think about it are only negations and secondary phenomena, never anything positive" (26). The question is, can we substantially justify that death is elusive and incomprehensible? Irvy Yalom answers that "life and death are not independent; they exist simultaneously, not consecutively" (29). Popovi interpreted Yalow as saying that both "our body and our consciousness are familiar with death as something inseparable from life.... The important thing is to encompass both life and death as a unity" (35). Martin Buber sums up the foregoing with the assertion: "Man... as comprehension of being that looks towards death, cannot be separated from man as a creature that begins to die when it begins to live, and that cannot possess life without death, or preserving power without destructive and disintegrate power" (164).

Human life having been in existence has two possibilities either to be immortal or mortal. If humans were to be immortal, there are three possibilities either humans grow to a certain maturity and remain constant there, grow old and degenerate to a younger age, or grow old and be stocked at a less energetic age. Each of these three latter possibilities could constitute more nuisance to society and misery to human existence. If there is no death, there could be overpopulation which could lead to explosion and scarcity of many things' humans need. If humans grow old and stock at a less energetic age, other people have to bear the burden forever, and the less energetic themselves will continue to experience the pain that comes with their condition. In the other two possibilities of immortality, the wicked people will continue to live and carry out their evil acts. With death, the possibility of some people doing evil and inflicting pain and hardship on others forever is being taken care of.

While death is unarguably a human existential predicament, it would be unfair to argue that it has only that part or role in human existence. Thinkers who hold the one-way traffic analysis on death fail to understand the true nature of the evils ravaging humans in existence. The disasters which befall human lives are both natural and artificial or manmade. Many of the so-called natural are consequences or by-products of human excesses. For instance, the excessive mining of underground resources can lead to earthquakes; global warming and climate change can result in drought, flooding, and tsunamis; drought causes or helps wildfire to spread uncontrollably. All the above are consequences of human actions, then, the question is: how natural are natural disasters? Also, the mass production and usage of weapons in the killings of humans in large numbers contribute significantly to unwanted death. Death could

also be an escape route to people who are suffering incurable sicknesses and diseases, which makes it a necessary evil.

Some people terrorize, kill, and subject others to suffering and disastrous conditions. That is, they are the enablers of evils and disaster. Now, the enablers of these disasters befalling human lives are taken away from us by death. Sadly, death has no discrimination on who should be the next to die, this seems to be the major concern of the Terminator and the absurdity philosophers. What defines human beings is sameness in biological and physiological characteristics and mortality. It follows, therefore, that all humans must die. There is no way the bad people will die and the good ones will continue to live forever (at least in our present universe, perhaps, that is possible in paradise based on the promise of religion). If all humans were immortal, we would have concluded that 'it would have been worse not to have been dying' because evil would be more widespread than we have now. The enablers of evil will prevail over good people, as it is easier to plunder than to plow. If known tyrant leaders and many other terrorists over the millennia were to be immortal, even a fetus would understand what evil is. That is, the evils of our world today would be more if people were not dying. Death, therefore, is a natural process that reduces evils in our society.

Conclusion

This paper examined what existence is, it opined that existence and reality cannot be separated strictly. It looked at philosophers of different epoch classifications of existence or reality. It also looked at existence concerning 'being', and avowed that 'human beings' are the nucleus of existence. As a result of the above, it examined the challenges or problems human beings face in existence, which is usually regarded as the 'crisis of existence'; and death being at the pinnacle of such problems or crises. It went further that the crisis of human existence has made many thinkers believe that coming into existence is worthless. Life according to these thinkers is meaningless because humans shall die one day. Based on these obvious existential predicaments, the question is, is it possible to portray a meaningful life devoid of evils? Or can life be meaningful when these evils abound?

The paper recognizes the crisis of existence and death as a devastating phenomenon; however, it argues that death is also a natural order that helps to govern the universe. Based on the foregoing, death is not totally evil, or better put death is a necessary evil, which serves multiple purposes. When death strikes, it could be bad and it could also be good depending on the angle it turns to people. Death could also be a good phenomenon even to the deceased, because it could be an escape from suffering and incurable sickness. The focus of philosophers and every human being should be to rationalize how to ameliorate existential conditions, reduce evil, and leverage fear of death. In other words, rational minds should focus on research that will contribute to the meaningfulness of life despite the presence of death and the crisis of human existence.

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